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AT THE FRONT







*Lieutenant, Alec Leith Johnston,  
1<sup>st</sup> King's Shropshire Light Infantry.  
Killed in action near Arras, April 22<sup>nd</sup> 1916*



# AT THE FRONT

BY

ALEC JOHNSTON

WITH A PREFACE BY

SIR OWEN SEAMAN

INCLUDING AN APPRECIATION BY

CAPTAIN INGRAM

R.A.M.C., D.S.O., M.C.

LONDON

CONSTABLE & COMPANY LTD

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## EDITOR'S PREFACE

THE purpose of this little volume is to preserve, for his friends and the many others who cared for his writings, a record of the work which Alec Johnston contributed to *Punch* during the War. Written under all sorts of impossible conditions, they never pretended to be more than the gay and cynical banter of one who brought to the hardships and perils of life at the Front an incurable habit of humour. For several years Alec Johnston had been associated with *Punch* as an occasional contributor of light verse and prose. After leaving Oxford where, as at St. Paul's School, he had given promise of a brilliant career, he became a schoolmaster, but his inclinations lay elsewhere and he would probably have followed the profession of letters but for the outbreak of war. Within two days he enlisted in the Artists' Rifles—he was then

twenty-five years old—and went out with their first draft in October, 1914. In February of the next year he received a commission in the 1st King's Shropshire Light Infantry, and was with them first at Armentières, and then upon the Ypres salient till his death. He was promoted Lieutenant in September, 1915.

For an account of his high courage and of his gallant end I am indebted to an R.A.M.C. officer attached to his battalion, Captain Ingram, D.S.O., M.C. ; who, within a few weeks of writing this memorial to his friend, was himself reported missing, and, later, found dead. Captain Ingram had gone forward with only one other man close up to the enemy's barbed wire to look for the wounded of his battalion. His death lends a note of tragic poignancy to his tribute ; and its value as an appreciation of bravery in another may be measured by his own record of gallantry, so splendid that his Colonel wrote of him to his father : " Your son was the bravest man I ever met."

Here follows what Captain Ingram said of Alec Johnston :—

“ Lt. Alec Johnston, 1st King's Shropshire Light Infantry, was shot through the heart by a German sniper at dawn on April 22nd, 1916. In a sense his work was done and certainly well done. At shortest notice, the battalion had been called upon to retake a vitally important salient that had been captured and consolidated by the enemy for forty-eight hours. After his captain had been severely wounded, he led the centre company of the attack, and in inky darkness, through driving rain, over shell-torn ground in waist-deep mud they made good. For that night's work the battalion was personally thanked by the Corps Commander, and mentioned by name in despatches.

“ All that night Johnston was indefatigable ; he was everywhere, strengthening the captured position, beating off counter-attacks, and, to save time, always moving about in the open. As dawn was breaking he refused to go into the safest part of the trench, saying, that when it was too light to stay ‘ on top ’ he would go into ‘ the first old crump hole handy.’ Utterly gallant

always, the hotter the show the cooler he got ; yet in no sense was he reckless, and he used his head at all times.

“ One example out of many : during a big attack at Hooze in August, 1915, owing to the dust and smoke Johnston's platoon lost direction and passed their objective in the darkness. He made his men lie down while he sat in a shell-hole and worked out a compass bearing back to the crater they were attacking ; and all this under such a shell fire that you could not hear the next man when he shouted in your ear. He was the only officer left with his company at the end of that day, and, although himself wounded in both legs, he led his men out, and stayed with them until ordered to the ambulance. Next day he escaped from the casualty clearing station and returned to the battalion, in order to write up the list of his men especially recommended for distinguished gallantry. That done, he returned to hospital and was not fit to rejoin the battalion for many weeks.

“ Although very modest and retiring, Johnston had a big and original mind,

which he never allowed to get rusty. A classical scholar at Oxford he had a facility for learning languages, and taught himself German during his spare time in the trenches.

“His personal preparations for his last attack consisted of an extra supply of revolver ammunition in one pocket, and a tin of bully beef and a small book of Russian fairy tales in the other.

“His way of writing his *Punch* articles was equally characteristic of the man ; he would dash them off anywhere, at any time, on any odd scrap of paper. I have seen him at night scribble the first part of an article while lying flat on his face in a tiny dug-out, much too small to sit upright in ; then crawl out on a patrol up to the German wire, have a scrap out there, and crawl back a couple of hours later, muddied from head to foot and soaked to the skin, to finish his article on the humours of patrolling at the Front. Work done like that could not fail to ring true, and Johnston with his quaint, original humour caught and described better than any other writer the spirit at the Front.

“ Alec Johnston was in a way typical of many men out here. At the outbreak of war he enlisted in the Artists’ Rifles as a private and after serving in the trenches for some months obtained a temporary commission in the 1st K.S.L.I.

“ Although a first-class fighting man, yet soldiering was not his *métier*, and he had no love of fighting for its own sake. A sense of duty, and duty only, brought him—his own ambition was to be a journalist and write plays. Yet when the call sounded he came without reward, without hope of reward ; it was impossible for him not to come.

“ Near Ypres in Belgium a cross marks his grave, and on the cross a little silver plate, sent by one who loved him, bears the words : ‘ WELL DONE.’ Never was epitaph better earned.

“ T. INGRAM.

“ FRANCE, 9-8-16.”

Alec Johnston’s letters from the Front which it has here been my sad pleasure to bring together are reproduced without revision or selection just as they appeared



in the pages of *Punch*. They were composed, as Captain Ingram has vividly shown, in the brief interludes snatched from hard fighting and hard fatigues; and naturally do not represent the best of which he was capable. He pictured for us his own experiences; and if his themes from time to time repeat themselves they do but faithfully reflect the weariness of daily duties. They need no apology. They are typical of that spirit of brave humour, essentially English, that makes light of the worst that fate can send.

Alec Johnston was not among those whose literary gifts have been discovered by the War. Like Captain Oswald Langley, of the Intelligence, author of "The Watch Dogs," he belonged to the company of Mr. Punch in the old days, and these two became, as by prescriptive right, his representatives at the Front. Outside Alec Johnston's own family and the circle of those who shared his intimate affections—and to these Mr. Punch asks leave to offer his deepest sympathy—there can be none more conscious of the loss sustained through

the untimely cutting-short of a career so rich in prospect. But—as with them, I trust—pride brings relief to sorrow ; pride in the thought of a life laid down, in the very summer of youth, for love of England and the Cause. That is our comforting solace as we inscribe the name of Alec Johnston on Mr. Punch's Roll of Honour.

OWEN SEAMAN.

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I

AT THE BACK OF THE FRONT



# AT THE BACK OF THE FRONT

## I

### *Northern France.*

As you will see from our address, here we are among the War Correspondents. But there is a mistake somewhere ; either there are not enough Germans to go round, or else they—Headquarters, you know—simply hate the idea of throwing the flower of the British Army into the full glare of the shrapnel. Anyhow, we haven't actually been engaged yet, though our Private Smithson has collected three bits of shrapnel and a German rifle ; and we have all heard artillery fire (off). Which makes us think that these rumours of war aren't just a scare got up to help recruiting.

Some doubt exists among us as to our precise function out here. Here we are (as I may have mentioned) a magnificent battalion of young giants, complete with rifles—every man has at least one and Private

Smithson has two—webbing equipment, cummerbunds, mufflers, cameras, sleeping caps (average, six per man) and even boots ; and yet they can't decide exactly what to do with us. Mind you, we are absolute devils for a fight ; we have already been reserve troops to five different divisions and thought nothing of it. We are not quite sure whether we get five medals for this or one medal with five bars. Not that we really care ; such considerations do not affect us. As Edward—the mascot of the section—observed to me the other day, “ I don't care two beans about medals ; I want to go home.”

But you ask what do we actually do ? Let no man believe that we are out here on a holiday. On the contrary we give ourselves over entirely to warlike pursuits. Some days we slope arms by numbers ; and other days we clean dixies and indent for new boots. Night by night we guard our approaches and prod the tyres of oncoming motors with fixed bayonets. Every morning the man who held up General French tells us about it with bated breath over our



bated breakfasts. It is one of the finest traditions of the corps that General French is held up by us every night. We have our own sentries' word for it. This is especially interesting in view of the persistent reports that he is in a totally different part of France. As he gives a different name every night and varies considerably in appearance we feel that there must be something behind it all.

Thompson, who is no end of a fire-eater and wants to be invalided home with a bullet in his left shoulder—he is engaged—has invented a scheme for getting to the front by sheer initiative. Our officers have quite a pedantic veneration for orders, field-marshal and other obsolete pink apron-strings. We are thus thrown back on our sergeants, a fine body of men whose one weakness is an enthusiasm for chocolate. Acting on this knowledge certain tactful and public-spirited privates in our midst will present the sergeants with two sticks of chocolate per sergeant on the understanding that they thereafter form the battalion into fours and march them circum-

stantially to the trenches. There are, by all accounts, such supplies of them that a few here and there are bound to be empty. Having occupied these we will all expose our left shoulders, and, having gleaned a whole shrubbery of laurels, return to Divisional H.-Q. The sergeants, such as survive, will then be court-martialled and shot at dawn, while the rest of the regiment will be honourably exiled to England in glorious disgrace. All that remains is for Thompson to approach the sergeants with chocolate.

## II

ACTIVE service is like oratory in that one of its biggest ideas is action. Being ostensibly on active service ourselves we felt we ought to see a little before going home ; and now we have. We make no boast about it. Like the simple English soldiers we are we merely state the fact for what it is worth.

You ask, you who lead the sheltered life, what we felt like under fire ; how you swim from one trench to another ; what we ate and drank ; and what a bayonet charge is really like. Let me answer your questions one by one.

(1) We were such a long way under fire that some doubt existed as to whether the Germans were merely trying to frighten us, or were engaged in testing new rifles and fired high and in no particular direction for fear of hitting somebody. We only had one casualty and he wanted to walk across to the German trenches and insist on an

apology and a new pair of boots, the right heel being practically torn off. But we convinced him that it was futile for an Englishman to argue with Germans, especially when ignorant of their language. If a German has made up his mind to be careless nothing will stop him. To return to the question, we didn't feel under fire at all.

(2) You aren't allowed to leave a trench ; and a man who was allowed to and then went to another shouldn't be allowed out at all.

(3) The soldier is not particular about his " tack "—as he calls his food. Bacon and eggs, sausages, chicken, washed down with hot coffee, are good enough for him to fight on. Failing even such humble comestibles he will, when pressed by hunger, open a tin of bully beef and decide he is not hungry after all.

(4) Bayonet charges are getting rather cheap, so we didn't have one.

We were opposed to the flower of the German army, the Kaiser's beloved Prussians. This we were told on our arrival. Next day we learned that a

prisoner taken turned out to be one of the Kaiser's beloved Bavarians. We subsequently discovered—well, to save time you might just take a map of the German Empire and pick where you like.

If anyone tells you that our heroes live in trenches like tessellated boudoirs in an atmosphere of sybaritic luxury you might just put him right. Our Edward had got hold of some such idea from diagrams in the illustrated papers. When we reached the crumbling ruins we were to defend, an officer was so impressed by Edward's air of woebegone disgust that he observed brusquely that, in the trenches, comfort was a matter of minor importance.

This assurance pulled Edward together for the moment ; and he had just settled down to a placid expectation of the evening meal when we learned that our commissariat had stuck in the mud some miles back. However, as a second officer cheerfully observed, in the trenches food is a matter of minor importance. Edward, who had pinned all his faith on the commissariat, relapsed into a resigned melancholy.

Just as he was making his poor but ingenious preparations for slumber in a dug-out that looked like a badly drained pond a third officer came along. A digging fatigue was wanted for the night. We were it. Edward moaned, not mutinously, you understand, but expressively. The third officer turned on him sharply. "In the trenches," he observed epigrammatically, "sleep is a matter of minor importance."

Edward and I returned at 3 A.M. As he flopped wearily down I heard him murmur judicially: "In the trenches soldiers are matters of minor importance."

Edward never got really fond of the trenches.

### III

SOME people say that the authorities have at last come to understand our true merits ; some people say that they have come to despair of us as private soldiers. Some even identify the two allegations. Howbeit, from whatsoever cause, certain of us are in imminent danger of losing our private status. We are assembled together by companies and instructed in the arts of inspecting water-bottles, telling the time on starless nights by radium-pointed watches, and in all practical and tactical usages that fall to the lot of a platoon-commander. In due course we shall pass out and take the war into our own hands ; pending which we meditate on our future responsibilities. Private Ingleby lives abstracted days wondering whether a machine-gun officer may without offence wear puce-coloured riding-breeches, while Edward spends sleepless nights theorising

on his procedure if unexpectedly put in charge of a brigade.

Our course of training is rapid and comprehensive ; nor are we vowed only to destruction. We think nothing, for instance, of building a bridge between breakfast and lunch, though of course we'd think a whole heap before treading on it. We are here to risk our lives, but not to throw them upon the waters.

No secret of military art is hidden from us ; not one of us but can conduct a grand attack on his little own, and that without losing as much as a platoon. Watch General Private Williamson exercising his brief authority over his skeleton battalion. We arrive at the kick-off site. The General halts us, breaks us off, and begins his preliminary reconnaissance. In the far distance loom the twin flags representing enemy's position—an indication, we regret to report, frequently neglected by the Bosches. A lesser man than Private Williamson might immediately plump forward line upon line of extended platoons. *Pas si vite*. What is the first question our



General asks himself — or anyone else present ? He enquires the whereabouts of the nearest *estaminet*. Seated over his coffee he conducts, with the assistance of his staff (the attacking force), the preliminary reconnaissance. First of all we touch lightly on the proximity of the enemy. The General puts it at 2,000 yards ; the chief of staff at 800. That makes it, by a simple mathematical compromise, 1,400 ; which gives you your range chart, without which no attack is quite itself.

But the work of the General does not end here. The land must be spied out ; the country which we are—for some obscure reason—fighting for is one-half lake and one-half swamp. Accordingly, as the attack has to have clean boots on parade next day, scouts go forward to select the most land-like portions of the morass. Then at last we advance, and with only an occasional halt for coffee—this depending on the number of farms *en route*—we sweep on to the rallying position, where we sit down nonchalantly in a hail of bullets and discuss a haversack ration while a real officer tells

us how. His telling is competence itself, except in one respect ; he never makes sufficient allowance for coffee. No one has told him that the arms of our service battalion are an *estaminet couchant* in a field sodden.

Anon we study billeting. There is in the North of France a crazy old farmhouse full of tumultuous children and their mother. It has, I believe, been condemned as a billet by all the sanitary authorities in France. The accommodation is an antique barn with a leaky roof above, a cesspool underneath, and the four winds of heaven raging between. We visit by parties. The party arrives at the farmhouse and knocks timidly. The door sways open, and four or so children hurl themselves upon the leader's puttees, demanding souvenirs. Madame appears capaciously from a cookery - pervaded interior.

“ What is it that it is ? ”

Has she, we ask, place for some soldiers ?

“ But yes,” says Madame (contrary to the custom, but she knows well how safe she is). “ See you ! It is by here ! ”

We go by there and see, while Madame tells us of her sons at the war—only five, fortunately—their names, ranks, localities, ages and prospects. We appreciate ; we admire ; and, when her vocabulary, even at the killing pace she subjects it to, outlasts ours, we fall back on sympathetic grunts that sound as if we were learning German or sickening for diphtheria. Arrived at the barn we mark and measure duly, and find to our surprise that it would still—as on our last visit—hold sixty-four men if it would hold any (without chains we fear it wouldn't). Then we relieve the lady by assuring her that we already have the offer of an even better billet elsewhere ; and she beams more maternally than ever and announces that coffee is now served ; and we for our part realize that even War has its beautiful moments.

## IV

WHEN you are in the throes of War the great thing is to eat like a horse. Organisation is the keynote of efficient eating ; hence our Mess. We are seven, and take turns at the duties of Mess orderly. When we get into a town, even horses aren't in it with us—for one thing they don't billet horses in towns much. But we have our failures. Witness our stay at Grande Choupe. (Note to Censor.—This name does not exist.)

Grande Choupe is a town of no mean aspirations. It can sell you wine and vinegar under the same name. We went there for a seven days' rest, and the cooks promised roast meat nightly.

Wilmot was Mess orderly the first day ; he got wine and prunes and hot fried potatoes and other exotics. The meat was a dream, but we had no salt. We almost expelled Wilmot from the Mess to

get it ; but War has softened us, and we forbore.

Robbins was on next day ; he bettered Wilmot by finding a pot of Blunker's Manchester Marmalade in an obscure *épicerie*—an achievement which so impressed us that we all but forgave him for forgetting the salt ; but some hard things were said to Maynard, who produced neither salt nor marmalade on the third day.

On the fourth Whipple alleged that he *had* bought salt and left it in the shop ; he put on a great many airs about it, and seemed to expect a D.S.O. His behaviour encouraged Decker to make the same omission on the next night.

Then came my turn. I made a knot in my equipment the night before, and thought on the morrow of nothing but salt until I met Warne of the North-East Yorkshires. What with having to salute Warne, and fixing up to feed with his Mess, and swopping lies with him, I somehow—well, anyhow, I was quite glad afterwards I hadn't to dine *chez nous*.

Then came the seventh and last day,

with Dixon on duty. Dixon is one of those thorough men. He does his shopping with little bits of paper. Had Dixon been on earlier our stay would have been a perfect oasis of salt. Dixon went straight out after breakfast and bought salt—a good deal of salt—enough for anything between a battalion and a brigade. We all came and inspected it; we boasted of it to the rest of the section; its fame spread to the rest of the platoon. The rest of the platoon lacks initiative; it accepts saltless roasts in a spirit of dull acquiescence. We took pity on them and lent them salt—as much as they wanted.

That night the cooks—thanks to the A.S.C., and to a great effort on the part of our quartermaster—gave us a change, boiled salt beef.

We never speak of salt in our Mess now.

## V

WE are coming to the end of a long journey. The end is Victoria, and the next trip begins after four days. Some of us are taking lessons in English already, and Smithson has picked up a Guide to London in this town, so we ought to get on all right.

In the meantime we are finishing the first lap, as we began it, well to the back of all the fronts in the neighbourhood, learning the inner nature of the machine gun. In the trenches all you know about an m.g. is that it looks like a lump of mud with handles stuck on, and that its *modus operandi* is to wake up about 2 A.M., say pop-pop-pop, go to sleep again, and clear off in the morning just before the shells come along.

On closer acquaintance, machine guns have more in them than that. On account of these Germans I can't tell you everything about them, but the rough idea is that the

m.g. is an accumulation of any number of odd-shaped bits which jam when you rotate the crank-handle. Gunnery consists in unjamming them. There are roughly 217 kinds of jam, not counting the one you can get by putting india-rubber and orange-peel into the gib-spring. The German gun is far superior, admitting of 532 variations, not counting those adventitiously induced by the insertion of *leberwurst* under the star-board buffer spring.

We grow handier day by day ; this morning our brightest pair went into action in 4 min. 29 sec. It wasn't so much the time (standard, 40 seconds) that impressed the instructor as the ingenuity of the deed. We (I was one half) made the gun look so inoffensive that no Bosch could possibly have taken a counter-offensive against such an object. Not even a baby-killer would think of issuing an order like " Dilapidated mangle, half left, apparently struck by lightning, 700 yards, fire ! " so completely had we disguised the death-dealing terror. Not less completely did the instructor disguise his admiration.



You should see our class. At all times we are a hive of unremitting industry ; but most of all when it comes to cleaning the gun after firing. The instructor himself monopolizes the gun, fiddling about with that air of deft sagacity peculiar to the born mechanic. Whitton stands at the ready with the cleaning rod, every fibre alert, as he supports his supple frame against a pillar. Ingleby, seated, is seeing that nothing happens to the lock, while Burfield is looking round busily for the oil-tin. Not one of us but has a special job.

Those of us who meet our worries all the way are perturbed at the prospect of making our needs known in Teutonic. Ingleby only knows two words, to wit *höchste Gefechtsbereitschaft* ; and even with them he is not quite at ease. He can never remember whether they are one of the War Lord's shorter titles or the technical term for some breed of Westphalian sausage.

On the whole, however, we are too deeply absorbed in the machine gun to allow cosmopolitan predicaments of the near or far future to upset us. Whitton, who has

undertaken to ring up about forty-five acquaintances on his arrival in town, is permanently depressed by the conviction that the only number he will be able to give the operator when called on will be "303 Maxim." And yet there are those among the authorities who complain that we take our instruction too light-heartedly.

II

AT THE FRONT



# I

WEEKS and weeks ago a German battery got the range of a slab of railway from which our armoured train had been grieving them ; and but for the fact that the train had moved off about half-an-hour earlier it might quite easily have been hit. The German battery was so pleased at this victory that they now make a hobby of this bit of the line, dusting it up daily from 5 to 7.30 P.M. ; and I should think it would be very dangerous for anyone who was actually present at that hour. But, as nobody ever is, our casualties at this point are negligible. In the meantime the noise is horrid ; and our billet has already thought out several polite notes to the battery commander, pointing out that we like to make up lost sleep between tea and dinner. The only difficulty is in the matter of delivery.

There was a time when the trenches were as restful as billets ; such halcyon days are

gone. An offensive attitude is demanded. We must, it is felt, prove to the Bosch our activity, our confidence in ourselves, our contempt of him, and, in short, our *höchste Gefechtsbereitschaft* (all rights still reserved). To achieve this without actually attacking takes a bit of doing. A specimen of demonstrative operations ordered during twenty-four hours may, without giving too much away, be briefly sketched :—

4 A.M. Alternate platoons will sing *God save the King*, *Tipperary* and *The Rosary* until 4.15, and alternate sections will fire one round rapid. Should the Bosch disregard this——

6 A.M. Swedish drill will take place on the parapet. This having failed to draw fire or other sign of hostile attention——

10 A.M. The regimental mouth-organist section will play the *Wacht am Rhein* flatly, timelessly, tunelessly, but still recognisably. When both sides have recovered——

5 P.M. Two companies will fire salutes at the setting sun, while the remaining two will play Association football in front of the barbed wire.

By some such policy of frightfulness we daunt the Bosch from day to day, and we have small doubt that on that afternoon when we go "over the top" to take tea with him he will meet us halfway with raised arms and a happy smile of relief at the ending of his suspense.

## II

THERE is a delusion current that this war out here is stationary when it does not move. It is true that there was once a rumour that certain lines of trenches came to understandings with certain other lines, by which blue and red flags were waved before the occupants on either side fired off rifles, or committed similar dangerous acts which might otherwise have been interpreted as unfriendly. In the meantime they completed the tessellation of their pavements and installed geysers and electric light. Everyone has heard the rumour, but no one you meet was actually there ; so the only conclusion we can come to is that both sides dug and dug until they got completely lost underground, and were either incapable of return, or so happy, comfortable and well found that they stayed there, thus ingeniously leaving the war without leaving their posts, which is,



after all, the ultimate ideal of troglodytic patriotism.

However that may have been, the war elsewhere is in a state of steady evolution. You can never count on it. You get into a beautiful quiet trench, the sun shines and the birds sing, and you plant primroses on the parapet, and arrange garden parties, and write home and ask the sister of your friend to come out and have tea in the trench on Friday. And then on Friday just as you're getting the tea-things out, and sorting the tinned cucumber sandwiches, and shifting the truffles out of the *pâté*, the wind blows from the north, and the rain rains, and the birds shut up, and an 8-inch shell comes crump on the primrose bed, and stray splinters carry away the teapot and the provision box and the cook ; and on the whole you're not sorry Leonore couldn't come after all.

Not long ago it seemed good to the *état majeur* that no officer should be in possession of the means of supplying the pictorial daily with pictorial war. Every company in every battalion duly rendered a certificate

that it was without cameras. Now there was a certain battalion much given to photographic studies. And when the day came that the certificate should be signed and rendered, the commander of A company bethought him of his old-time friendship with the commander of B company ; and in token of his sincere esteem sent to him as a gift the three cameras which his officers had no further use for. This done, he forwarded his certificate. B company, though delighted at the gift and the spirit in which it was offered, had already four cameras in possession of its officers. Moreover, the time for B company to render its certificate was at hand. And seeing that there was much friendship subsisting between B and C companies the O.C. B company remembered that the O.C. C company was a keen photographer, and one likely to welcome a gift of seven cameras. Having despatched them, he signed and certified for B company. C company, whose gratitude cannot easily be described, was nevertheless in an obvious predicament. So, when C company certified, D company was in possession of thir-

teen cameras ; and finding that A company had now no cameras at all rendered unto it the very large stock with which it was reluctantly obliged to part, and unto the C.O. a certificate that D company was cameraless ; and the C.O. certified in accordance with company notifications.

That evening company commanders dined together, and latest advices advise that the wicked battalion still spends its spare time in photographing approaching shells, devastated churches and Tommy at his ablutions.

### III

EVER since I gave up working and became a soldier I have longed to be in charge of an outpost. Then at last I felt I should get clear about the relations of its curious component parts. Can you, for instance, I have wondered, draw on your fatigue men for sentries over reconnoitring patrols? If you can't, you have twenty idle men and fifty vacant jobs; if you can, you have twenty men far too busy doing the fifty jobs. It didn't seem quite satisfactory either way. I felt it must be one of those arrangements that are right enough in practice but break down when you come to theory. I wanted the thing to play with a little by myself.

Not until three days ago, however, was I ever in charge of any such thing; then to my great joy, instead of going back to the enervating influence of our billets, I was sent to look after twenty men and one outpost.

Frankly I am disappointed. I don't believe it is an outpost. I don't believe it ever was an outpost. The twenty men are there all right. True, I'm always losing one or two in the straw, but they turn up again at rifle inspection. I don't really complain of the men ; it's the apparatus that's all wrong. The post—I won't call it " out " any more ; if I qualified it at all I should call it an inpost—consists of a stable, two cupboards, and a cellar. There used to be a house, too, facing towards Germany, but I can't find it anywhere now.

So much for the actual post. Now for us. We never reconnoitre, we never patrol, we never picket and we hardly ever fatigue. One sentry, and he by night only, watches over the entire proposition. If you were to enter suddenly you would fancy you had stumbled upon a homœopathic hospital for the treatment of sleeping sickness—in short, *non* outpost *sed* bedpost.

The reasons for this scandalous state of affairs are twain. In the first place we have a whole firing line some hundreds of yards in front of us. So the chances against the

Bosch arriving unbeknownstlike (as the corporal puts it) are less large than might appear if I were to swank to you that we were *really* an outpost. In the second place the disintegration of the house that used to face Germany, and a considerable accumulation of sizeable craters round about, suggest that it would be unwise for us to advertise our presence. We are, in fact, a sort of ambush. The men are first-class at ambushing, so far as we have gone at present.

To leave the post by day you must crawl out through a hole in the wall, and carry on through fourteen other holes in walls to a point some hundred yards in rear. You may then walk about and pretend to be a reconnoitring patrol or a picket as much as you like. We usually reconnoitre after leeks and lettuce, but there are carrots still surviving and strawberries to come, if, as seems to be the general opinion, we are here for three years or duration of war.

My cupboard is simply but tastefully furnished, with one chair, six boxes small-arm ammunition, one incomplete escritoire

and four bricks (loot). When helped out with lilac, soldiers' buttons, hyacinths and pansies, it hardly knows itself, and the Major, dropping in unexpectedly the other day, mistook it for a room.

We have our moments of excitement even here. Now and then my appetite is broken by sudden messages, always arriving as I sit down to my lettuce. Then I parade the garrison and speak to them as follows :—

“ Englishmen—(pause ; electrical effect ; two men drop their rifles)—Englishmen, your time of trial has come. Since we cannot go to the war the war is to come to us. The Adjutant has arranged for us to be heavily shelled (by the enemy) shortly after 3 A.M. to-morrow. Englishmen, I rely on you to behave as such ; I am persuaded that you will. After dusk we will fare forth and put three more layers of sand-bags over the cellar. We will sleep there to-night and spend to-morrow there. Englishmen, dis—miss ! ”

They are a mutinous crowd, I am afraid. They finished the job just as our guns

started ; then they all went to the front of the building and looked on. The enemy were mutinous too ; they didn't shell us at all the whole morning. I told our Adjutant, and I expect he'll do something pretty severe about it.



## IV

IT is hard for the most insensible of men to look on at this war unmoved for long. We have looked on at it for months and months and months from a haunt of ancient peace known for some obscure antiquarian reason as a firing line ; and now we are to be moved ; to-morrow, or the next day, or, to sum up all the possibilities in the word of the historic despatch, " shortly." Indeed, the Sergeant-Major even now approaching with his indestructible smile may bear the details that we are to follow. The Sergeant-Major is a great man for a detail. Nothing escapes him. Three weeks ago measles stole into our midst like thieves in the night. The S.-M. had them before you could say " Bosch."

Pending the push-off, we anti-asphyxiate ourselves. There used to be some doubt, among N.C.O.'s supervising, as to whether the impedimenta supplied for that end were

inspirators or perspirators. Eventually they compromised on "gas-bags." Only nine patterns have so far been issued, but the more cautious of us wear all these simultaneously, so if Nos. 1, 3, 5, 7 and 9 fail, 2, 4, 6 and 8 may prove efficacious.

Preparations for the trek are in train. Each Platoon Commander—in view of the fact that men who have lived nine months in ditches may have mislaid the use of their feet—has written out slips permitting No. 000 Private Blank to fall out and report at Dash with all possible expedition. Now our Mr. Mactavish is a very thorough officer, and he was determined that no one was going to catch *him* out through his having too few of these backsliding permits. But when I found him engaged on the sixty-fourth, the strength of his platoon being forty-seven, I felt compelled to demand some explanation. He seems to have assumed that some men might fall out twice. To me, the assumption that men whose feet have given way will pick up a taxi somewhere and overhaul you just for the pleasure of falling out again, appeared rash.

Since the foregoing was indelible, we have walked a great walk—seven leagues, no less. At intervals, we bivouac in odd bits of Europe that happen to be unoccupied when we stumble on them. Some are crowded with horrible dangers. Never shall I forget seeing Private Packer wake up from his afternoon sleep to find himself practically in the act of being bitten by a ferocious cow. Springing up with a loud cry, he threw the officers' kettle at the savage ruminant ; whereas by all the best traditions he should have continued to smile. Fortunately the cow (like President Wilson) was too proud to fight.

The trek has been a great disappointment to those who were looking forward to writing home brave accounts of " how I marched forty miles on a biscuit and a cough-lozenge." When we got to our first bivouac three of us had just made a frugal meal of malted milk tablets and melted barley sugar when the mess sergeant loomed up with the news that lunch was served. My appetite was so impoverished by previous indulgence that I gave up after

the third course. But the coffee and cigars were admirable.

We are now billeted in a wood. The billets make excellent fuel, and there are no wild animals except beetles, which, though large and highly coloured, appear quite pacific. The glow-worms glow of an evening and help out the embers of the moribund fires, which are strictly doomed to die with the daylight. Round these embers Mr. Atkins stands in groups and renders with every variety of modulation and idiosyncrasy, but with united cheerfulness, his famous patriotic number, "I want to go home." The stars are in their heaven and Mr. Atkins is not downhearted.

## V

WE have come to the conclusion that the people who arrange the battles have decided that their attitude to us is to be one of attempted frightfulness. Whereas other battalions enjoy all the amenities of peaceful trench life, with, say, a battle on every third Thursday, we are continually threatened with some fresh and frightful prospect which never materialises. In fact, we are constantly disappointed.

Sometimes they turn us out at dead of night and ship us to some forlorn bit of line, pleasant only in the forgetting, and assure us that we shall all be dead in two hours, and that the old country is already proud of us. The beginning of the third hour finds the Mess-President still pillaging Belgium for something to fry eggs in. The next evening sees us re-entraining for France, billets and security, with nothing more glorious to carry back than a sleepy surmise that the old

country must have reconsidered her decision just in time.

Sometimes again they think out for us a highly unfortified attack on a highly fortified position. Then the General, or the General's General, sends for Company Commanders—at least it gets to them eventually, possibly by indirect fire—and exhorts them with cheerful words such as, "On the afternoon of to-morrow, Friday, the 17th inst., you will spring lightly over your parapet and take the enemy's first line trenches, second line trenches, third line trenches, fourth line trenches, machine guns, communications, keeps, small arm ammunition, large arm ammunition, guns, transport, strategic railways and *personnel*. You will send the Kaiser to Belgian G.H.Q. and hand over Little Willie to your battalion Sergeant-Major to birch severely."

We spend the night working up a deuce of a hate, and cutting great chunks out of our barbed wire. Some of the officers even have their rifles cleaned, and when dawn arrives the Bosch is frightened out of his life by the strange music of our men grind-

ing their bayonets on their teeth—an old and little-known army custom always observed on the morning before an attack.

Then at last, as we are finishing a frugal ration of lunch tongue and apricots and cream, touching up our wills, and writing home assurances that everything continues very quiet, a foaming signaller dashes up to the mess hut and falls in a dead faint in the act of delivering the message, "Submarine U296 sunk this morning, A.A.A. Your attack postponed indefinitely. Ends." And then everything continues very quiet, and we are left wondering whether there is a strategical connection between U296 and our attack, or whether Mr. Balfour just wired the news out of pure goodness of heart.

After they had played the attack game often enough to impel the two senior Captains to tell some of our leading Generals not to be silly, they moved us off here as a punishment for not taking our attacks seriously. "Here" is the seat of the original Flanders frightfulness. The Bosch has done all his best turns; he gassed us the

second night in, and he shells our support line with enormous missiles for one half of every day. But as we got warning of the gas half-an-hour before it arrived, and as the support line he shells is, like the equator, imaginary, we are not yet wiped out, though the brigades and divisions and army corps to left and right are worried a little with the splinters of the shells dropped in our sector. We are now quite settled into our new war ; the daily round, the common task, is like this, and it never varies :—

0.5 A.M. — B 18's bomb-blunderbuss frightens German listening post.

0.30 A.M.—Battery of Little Willies sends us four short and two over, under delusion that we are B 18. (We are A 8.)

3.30 A.M. — Battery Commander of German heavies (left rear of Hill 2493), returned by theatre train from Brussels, orders test mobilization of battery. 1 and 4 are always short, 3, 5 and 6 apparently laid, with devilish ingenuity, to ensure enfilade effect on imaginary support line. Something will have to be done about 2 ; it is nothing short of a public danger, and



might well be made the ground of a conference.

10—11 A.M.—Three young batteries blow in A 8 f vi.—this is a trench in Flanders, not a form for claiming a rebate in respect of unmarried grandchildren. A 8 f vi. is not really occupied. When the young batteries have finished we build it up again with one row of sandbags. It is awful to think what would be the effect on our *moral* if they one day blew in A 8 f vii. by accident.

2—5 P.M.—Teuto - Britannic aviation sports. (Observe that the Britannic comes after the Teuto, as is always the case, but the Teuto usually gets away.)

6—10 P.M.—*Réchauffé* of odd shells, usually distributed neatly along roads; a few get tired on the way and try to drop in on us. But they can never remember the exact way, so we have to go out and bring them in, quite broken up.

Some day no doubt we are bound to get involved in this war they talk so much about in the illustrated papers. Some day we shall emerge glorious with full packs, mess-tins, blankets and other appurtenances of

famous attacks (*v.* contemporaries) and with our names once more on the—well, whatever it is one writes one's name on in such circumstances. But at the moment it's weeks and weeks since we did as much as a bayonet charge.

## VI

THERE is a deservedly popular military song which states, with perhaps unnecessary iteration, that the singers are there because they're there, because they're there, because they're there. That is exactly how we find ourselves placed at the moment. Here is a dusty lane with eligible green-sward adjacent. We have been here since 9 A.M. and it is now 6 P.M. We have long since given up discussing why we should be here, where we are going when we leave here, and, indeed, whether we are ever going to leave here.

Last night all was peace, except that I was told to sleep in my boots. I can only assume that they must inadvertently have slipped off ; for when the morning broke I appeared to be devoid of foot-fittings of any kind. While I was thinking over this mystery the Company fell in. Fortunately they were very sleepy and by the time my

platoon-sergeant had persuaded them to form something other than threes and fives I was on the spot explaining small but important technicalities, such as the advisability of taking ammunition when you're going to a battle, and the difficulty of getting a really satisfactory drink out of an empty water-bottle.

Eventually we set out and walked along some roads till we came to this one, where no doubt the following conversation took place :—

*C.O.* Have you the least idea where we are going to, or why ?

*Adj.* No, Sir.

*C.O.* Do you see any possible point in our going any further ?

*Adj.* No, Sir.

*C.O.* Then don't let's.

*Adj.* Very good, Sir. I will make it my business to see that the process is discontinued.

So we all sat down by the roadside and took off our equipment and almost everything else and went to sleep in the sun. . . .

It is now considerably later—two days

later, in fact. We still inhabit the dusty lane and eligible greensward. A fear has gone abroad that it has been assigned to us as a billet. This is all very fine in its way, but when you have received a message reading (more or less) : " Attack on in ten minutes' time ; bring a sand-bag and a bayonet," and you then find you have to live an indefinite time with a sand-bag for furniture and bedding, and a bayonet to shave and brush your teeth with, you come to realise that the greenwood tree business isn't half what it's cracked up to be. Besides, when you have found your place on the map—if you have one—and inspected your rifles and sand-bags and bayonets, there really isn't much to do here unless you have a geometrical turn of mind and care for plotting the angles between the butter-cups. If you are a keen soldier you can of course go on inspecting your platoon's rifles and sand-bags and bayonets, because, by the time you have criticized the last bayonet, going round conscientiously, there's no knowing what may have happened to the first rifle or sand-bag. This will keep the

men interested too, and save them from getting into mischief, surrounded as they are by all manner of temptations.

Before we ceased speculating on our prospects, our strategists advanced all possible views. The best supported theory was that we were being held in reserve to create a diversion through Switzerland which was to come in on the spur of the moment. The most obvious and horrible prospect—that of remaining here till the end of the war—no one has dared to put forward.

Yet ours cannot be a totally inglorious oblivion. Before we settled here we won fame. A very large if slightly bleary photograph, representing two of our sections on the march, had been published in a certain notorious daily journal which is fully prepared to finish the war in a month if it only gets the chance. It is true that the legend subjoined was “ Belgian Artillery Resting,” but you cannot expect glory *and* accuracy for a halfpenny, can you ?

## VII

THE ideal of every good soldier is, I am sure, to go through a battle that isn't really dangerous and emerge from it with a wound that doesn't really hurt. At the moment I have attained this disreputable consummation and am in the rare and refreshing fruit stage.

We are all proud of ourselves, and quite a number of the best people have wired to let us know they are proud of us, so perhaps I ought to let you know about Our Battle. I can, I am afraid, only give it you from my point of view.

At three something, A.M., during the most horrible noise since the cubist orchestra disbanded, I attacked with magnificent *élan*. I ran a dozen yards and fell into a shell-hole, then I got up and ran some more yards, and then, dear reader, I did the only possible thing—I walked. You who cover your five hundred yards at a run on Hamp-

stead Heath have no idea what you feel like starting off up-hill, on a hot night, after five days' close confinement, equipped with everything considered essential to destroying, saving and supporting life for a period of twenty-four hours. Fortunately a similar feeling seemed to have got hold of the men, and we went on looking like a sample of how not to perform extended order drill until we fell into a transverse depression which we eventually decided to be a trench. I conferred with myself for a moment, and realized that it wasn't the line we wanted, so we dashed on again relentlessly, at a pace that would have left a hedgehog standing, to our goal, where we remained, after necessary alterations, until they sent some unsuspecting regiment to relieve us next morning.

The first remark, as distinct from a shout, that I heard after leaving our parapet came from Private Henry, my most notorious malefactor. As the first attempt at a wire entanglement in our new position went heavenward ten seconds after its emplacement, and a big tree just to our right collapsed suddenly like a dying pig, he



turned round with a grin, observing, "Well, Sir, we *do* see a bit of life, if we *don't* make money." I never saw a man all day who hadn't a grin ready when you passed, and a bit of a *riposte* if you passed the time of day with him. And so we went away at last with our tails up, having done all things needful.

It was then that *my* troubles began. Some evilly disposed person imagined he had seen a bullet come into me and sneaked about it to the doctor, who came to inquire after it. I argued that, even if it had come in, it had gone straight on practically without stopping and that I had no idea where it was, and, anyhow, there must be plenty without bothering about that one, if it was munitions they wanted. I touched lightly on our eight-mile march back, and offered to illustrate a new one-step I had thought out.

The fact was, I explained, it was more what you'd call a half-step. Here the doctor, who had been worrying round, observed tersely—he makes rather a strong line of observing tersely—"a month, and then a fortnight's holiday."

So here I am, doing the month, and the only complaint I have to make now I'm really settled in here—they haven't moved me for two days—is about the fortnight's holiday.

The regiment says, "Of course you'll get sick leave;" whereas the doctor here is so optimistic as to suggest that I'll probably be able to get regimental leave, but sick leave is outside his province. There are therefore moments when I have hopes of getting both; on the contrary, there are moments——

After all, what does one want leave for, anyhow? What with "Sister Susie" and "Our Miss Gibbs" straight from England, and dear old English ladies stopping you in the street to ask after their sons, and no lights after eight, what more could England offer?

## VIII

It is true that in a sense all the home seas may be regarded as a front. And yet inwardly I have doubts as to whether I really am at the moment exactly what you might call frontal. Though correctly swathed in a *ceinture de sauvetage* I feel neither nautical, martial, nor amphibious. I defy anyone to feel nautical in a service dress jacket, martial in a life-belt, or amphibious in ammunition boots. Martial is my short suit at the moment. For one thing, any front there is is underneath. For another, I have lost my leave papers—if indeed I ever had any. In a few hours, barring accidents, I shall be turned off on to an unsympathetic quay, under orders from one race of red-hatted men eighty miles away from it to report to them this morning, and forbidden by another race of red-hatted men on the spot to proceed anywhere until I have given an account of myself ; which

just happens to be one of the few insignificant things I cannot do. My blind pig is considered one of the finest outside the Central Powers and I can play selections from several drawing-room ballads with my eyes shut and my left hand open ; but not even with both my honest straightforward eyes at their widest can I hope to convince Q. R. S. T. U. and other gentlemen with alphabetical occupations that I am not a deserter creeping and intruding and climbing into the war.

They will begin by saying, almost apologetically, that they don't doubt my *bona fides* (with four false quantities) for a moment. They will then doubt it exhaustively for three-quarters-of-an-hour, by which time my train will—as happens eventually even to trains in France—have gone. I shall arrive at dawn to-morrow just in time to be shot. It is true that the last time I was shot at dawn I got up and walked away. But this is not a reliable precedent, and I regard the future with the most perfect despondency. All I can do is to write the word “ Later.”

Later it is. Let me give you a hint ; if you should ever, in a military town, fall upon the *rôle* of the Man who Requires Explaining and are told to report to the A.B.C.D.E. find out what time he lunches. When we landed, I went straight to the A.B.C.D.E.'s office and there extorted by intimidation from an outpost the news that the officer usually went out to lunch at 12.30 exactly. I returned at 12.28. With one eye on his watch the A.B.C.D.E. held out the other hand. I shook it warmly.

"No, no," he said, "I want your leave papers—movement order, and all that."

It was 12.30 exactly when I began my explanation. At 12.35 I had reached its crowning feature. At 12.40 he realized that it was I who wanted a movement order. By 12.42 I had it in triplicate, with permission to travel by any train that day. I believe that if I could have hung on till 12.45 I could have got another seven days' leave. Even as things were I have the pleasantest recollections of the A.B.C.D.E. I reported everywhere to everybody's

satisfaction, and have not been shot at all to-day so far. And I have spent the morning wondering who put my leave papers at the bottom of my haversack.

## IX

THESE be stirring times. I remember well how, in the summer of 1915, we used to envy the company chosen to occupy the lump of line we now cherish so reluctantly. Under the shadow of the poppy-strewn corn the C.O. and an odd General or two would drop in for a bit of lunch with the Company Commander of Willow Walk ; and on its stately verandahs was enjoyed many a feast of walnuts, wine, strawberries, meat and vegetable rations, and sunburnt mirth.

Time can never let a good thing alone. When we came in five days ago we did not indeed expect sunburnt mirth. Four days' consecutive rain militated against mirth or sunburn. But we had hopes of finding Willow Walk the same haunt of ancient peace it had been of yore.

It was not.

It appears that the morning before we arrived the Willow Walk company had, at

the instigation of some heartless General, suddenly put on all the appearance of a body of desperate men on the point of an attack. They fired off their rifles regardless of the fact that you cannot turn out small arm ammunition under a penny a round. They screamed defiance in expeditionary French and forceful English ; and to top up with they let off a lot of horrid black smoke-bombs in the direction of the German trenches.

These playful acts, coming as they did from the cloistered avenues of Willow Walk, completely unnerved the Germans, who had been a good deal attacked in other places the day before. We thus diverted a lot of valuable artillery. The boly willows were ripped, torn and blown up. By dint of hitting nearly every inch of ground within a five hundred yards square, hostile artillery scored several direct bulls on the trenches therein contained. When I say several I mean some. When I say some I mean you could see it had been trenches once, even if you hadn't known.

I arrived while the echo of the last shell



of the day was still resounding, put my platoon down for a minute in what looked like a bit of ploughed field with some planks sticking out of it, told them to make themselves nice and comfortable for the night and went back to the mess dug-out to consider our prospects. I liked the mess dug-out. It was such a very cohesive conglomerate of protective appurtenances, it looked as if it would hate to break the set for anything under a 9-inch shell. It made me feel almost averagely brave.

I went back and reconsidered my trench. It didn't look so bad after all, once the sentries were posted and the N.C.O.'s mess had made tea. Anyone who really knows will tell you that tea is the dominating factor in this war. So I had tea, got the platoon plumbers and decorators to supervise necessary repairs, and turned as far in as circumstances allowed.

Next morning I awoke with a crash. I was shocked without being surprised. I dressed (*i.e.*, put my cap on) hastily and went to see what it was about. It was, it seemed, only a trench mortar. I flatter

myself I can be as unconcerned as anybody over a trench mortar I'm out of range of. I was just working up my most unconcerned manner when something came along very quickly and threw a section of my parapet over my parados. Similar incidents marred a magnificent day up till lunch-time. On the second day the Bosch lost his appetite for parapet - pushing by breakfast-time. Thereafter we had long oases of peacefulness that almost recalled the long dead days of summer. The Bosch had at last assured himself that we were not going to attack yet for a day or two.

Our stay in Willow Walk will be memorable not so much for the fact that it rained exactly from "stand to" at night to "stand to" at dawn as for the promotion of several promising young officers, who, including myself, shall be nameless ; and more especially for the inadvertence of a certain promising young officer's servant who, being given two extra stars to sew on to his master's jacket, so disposed them that the said master, on donning the jacket, was revealed as a second lieutenant on his left

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arm and a captain on his right. It is to be regretted that not even the additional offers of a field-marshal's baton and a good conduct stripe would persuade the officer to retain this striking and original constellation.

## X

IF you should happen to get into one of these wars and someone tells you to take over a farm, don't you have it without a character. You've got no idea how farms vary.

There is the Never-been-crumped kind, and the Not - been - crumped - for - months kind, and the May-be-crumpeds, and Will-probably - be - crumpeds, and Sure-to-be-crumpeds. If on inquiry you find that the farm they are trying to cajole you into belongs to either of the last two classes, you will do well to send on an advance party with a ton of gun-cotton and then report farm non-existent on arrival ; or to apply for a transfer to the Voluntary Munition Workers' Guild.

On the other hand you may enjoy in the healthier types an epoch of sylvan peace. Dead Spy Farm is in the second class. Except that we have to supply working

parties of one hundred-and-fifty nightly—which is a difficult sort of trick to bring off with a garrison of one hundred-and-three—we are left undisturbed to the contemplation of autumn tints.

Whoever the deceased spy was, he had some taste in farms. His moat is an object lesson in how much duck-weed you can get in without crowding out all the water. Round the moat runs an avenue of trees in "fall suitings" that recall the glories of Addison's Walk. The buildings themselves are portly, circumstantial and four-square, as all good farms are. There is a garden—not all it used to be—a well, and three cats, sole representatives of the late tenant. The mushrooming and ratting are satisfactory, and recent bags include a moor-hen and a foreign-looking cat suspected of espionage. The whole intact, except for three shell holes and portions of window glass.

Talking about working parties, there is a report that our battalion is to be sent to some other country where there is still good digging to be had. Hereabouts digging resembles the ploughing of some immemorial

field ; one rather wonders whether there is anything about the original trenches in Domesday Book or Magna Charta.

Take F. 107. We first knew F. 107 as an unrevetted communication trench with a sand-bag floor. A brigade fatigue traversed and footboarded it and called it " King's Road." An R.E. party dropped in one night with firing steps, and altered the name to " King's Castle." Three days later it rained for ten minutes and the sides fell in, and it was known as " The Marsh " and officially disused, until one day a very high sort of officer came round the lines and said all disused trenches in the system must be reclaimed.

This order was not popular, as it would have entailed the prolonging of the war to about 1977. However, we began on " The Marsh " and laboured bitterly sixteen nights with hurdles and sand-bags, and piles for the footboards, and called it " Half-done Terrace," to immortalise a sound beginning. The immortalisation lasted a fortnight, when a new official programme of the trenches fixed it until further notice as

F. 107. Now we are fitting it with model dug-outs. Of course the trench is not occupied, but it may be some day, and in the meantime it is bad for the troops to be idle.

This affair of picks and shovels has interested us as proving that the Angels who retreated from Mons are not the only incident in the war that defies normal explanation. It happened that on a certain Tuesday there came a wire to the Company requesting an immediate report to Headquarters of all tools on the Company charge. We reported. Later, on the same day, came a second wire requesting a report of tools on Company charge. We re-reported. On Wednesday morning arrived a wire explaining that Reference No. 19 of Tuesday report was not required after all. We were very relieved to hear this. On Wednesday afternoon we received a message requesting an immediate report to Headquarters of all tools on Company charge. This time we were roused and had the message repeated. They very kindly repeated it. We re-re-reported. At 7 P.M. we received a wire

cancelling demand for report on tools. The Company Commander did not go sick, however, until Thursday morning, when a wire arrived : “ Reference No. 7 of Wednesday : why have you not reported ? ”



## XI

A MILITARY humourist remarked the other day that trench warfare was becoming a constant drain. Last winter the privilege of being able to write home and say you were up to your knees in water was so highly esteemed that no one ever suggested such a sacrilege as the draining of a trench. This winter we are reformed characters. What remains of the trenches is as dry as the routine order prescribing for them, and on this theme there is nothing to write home about. The British Army has made four drains to every trench, so we have every prospect of a rainless winter.

Talking about constant drains we are so reduced that I have had to take over a company, just for a few days, until they can get an officer. Nevertheless, except that I have stopped speaking to Platoon Commanders, I don't put on a bit of side about it.

On the other hand you must not imagine

that I regard my duties lightly. Only yesterday I built a new mess kitchen. It is completely self-contained, and when it grows up and we borrow the electric range from the Hun opposite it ought to turn out anything up to an eight-course dinner in less time than it takes to persuade the enemy to retaliate.

We are also making a new recess to match the kitchen, a palace with all the requirements of a coal-cellar except the coal. Our half-hoop roofings are creating quite a furore round about. These *derniers cris* of this season's fancy ironwork were discovered loitering suspiciously among the ruins of a barn. For months every officer looked at them appreciatively as he passed, and observed to his friends, "Fine stuff for roofing a dug-out! We must use them as soon as we have a battalion to spare for carrying them." I ended their hopes by discovering that a company could carry one at a time comfortably. Now I write under the shadow of their spreading eaves, and our only trouble is that one of those Generals who keep popping in may want to know

why we've been wasting time that might have been spent on draining.

Two evasions present themselves. In the first place there is always a good chance of passing the mess off as a drain. Alternatively I may remark lightly, "My dear General, that old bungalow of ours was positively unfit to receive company in—much less to command one. When I became liable to the honour of your visits, I felt it my first duty to run up a salon worthier of your rank." By the time I have finished this pretty speech the General will be at the end of my line. On the word "rank" I shall salute smartly and fall out.

There are still some Germans somewhere round; they are of the Prussic sort and very acid. They seem to be experts in mixed frightfulness, which they get off their chests in short rushes as it were. Thus from 10 to 10.30 A.M. comes a shower of rifle grenades; from 2.30 to 3 P.M., an assortment of shells; while we have two brisk half-hours of rifle and machine guns after dusk. In the small hours of the morning the air is full of the noises of bombous projectiles. I

rush up as slowly as I decently can to the sap-head to inquire who is hit, and am informed by a very unconcerned and obviously contemptuous listening-postman that the nearest bomb fell fifty yards short. As the hours of the morning grow larger we return to a shell and mortar diet ; and so it goes.

There was once a very old-established Company Commander in our sector who, having had to furnish the brigade with reports on drainage, coke issue, sniper-scopes, a wire-cutting patent, the health of his command, and a new anti-frostbite slush, and being further asked, on the same day, to "report on enemy's attitude," sent in the following illuminating wire :—  
"Enemy's attitude hostile." Anon came a brigade reply :—"Please amplify your report on enemy's attitude." Whereupon the Company Commander amplified :—  
"Enemy's attitude distinctly hostile."  
This correspondence was then closed.

## XII

OUR only consolation nowadays is to look with enjoyable contempt on troops who sometimes go into billets. For our part we hop round from one bit of line to another, making the parapets sit up and planting forests of wire.

The last Company Commander I took over from was more than commonly proud because he had heightened his parapet two feet to stop dropping bullets. We went to have a look at it, and then, unfortunately, just as I was saying, "By Jove!" or "The way you chaps work beats me," or something sympathetic and suitable, I went and sneezed—and the top two feet fell in. We never really settled whether the fault lay with my sneeze or his parapet. At all events we have now made the latter sneeze-proof.

One of those happy little touches that make war so awfully jolly came along a few days ago. We had a corporal of another

branch of the service attached to us. At least he knew he was attached, but we didn't. Taking advantage of this one-sided arrangement he invaded our mess kitchen at an early hour on the first morning of his attachment and conveyed therefrom sundry edibles and utensils, most notably a glorious brazier that is the object of our cook's pride and affection. When any especially large shells burst in his simmering soups—or as near as makes no matter—his brow clouds for a moment only, and then he looks at his brazier, and the thought of it brings back the sunshine to his soul. Hence the loss of this trophy was no common bereavement. Our cuisine for twenty-four hours was damnable—we could have fed better in Soho. A search-party penetrated wherever it might and asked questions of the corporal who knew nothing about it. But he had counted without our cook's pertinacity. The search was renewed next day; the corporal's dug-out was entered in his absence and the brazier recaptured. The staff came to me clamouring for blood. I sent for the corporal, who loudly protested his absolute

innocence. I examined him, and just as I had extorted a complete confession a note arrived. It had originated in Corporal Blank, prisoner at the bar, and passed through Corporal Blank's officer, through the Brigade, through our Adjutant. It consisted of a request that our servants should supply Corporal Blank, attached, with wood and coke on demand.

It is odd that your proper soldier, who should be a blunt man, hates calling a spade anything short of "shovels, g.s., 1." His mind takes pleasure in figures and rejoices in cryptic initials. Witness the attitude adopted by the military post-office to a letter addressed to the C.O. in terms of revolting clearness. The addresser, no doubt a civilian, had written on the envelope words such as these :—Lt.-Col. Thingummy, D.S.O. (that is not our C.O.'s real name, nor is the remaining address an infringement of censorial rights), 275th Infantry Brigade, 91st Division, 14th Army Corps, Sixth Army, British Expeditionary Force.

As this was written without any abbrevia-

tions, the military postmen were naturally very much upset. For days they kept the letter and pondered over it. They sent for consulting postmen from London, an X-ray apparatus from Paris, and four prominent detectives from Scotland Yard. The conclusions thus arrived at were handed over to the intelligence branch at G.H.Q., who had Kitchener over for the week-end. Finally they faced the envelope fairly and squarely, and some leading man among them erased the original address and substituted: "Try 275 I. B." It only remains to tell that this wild shot in the dark succeeded, and the envelope, now treasured by the C.O., records the monumental sleuthiness of our soldier postmen in the most discouraging circumstances.

\* \* \* \*

Of late we live in a marsh handed over by a sister division as a trench area. On our occupation the rain began its winter session, and we ran up against a simple little bit of arithmetic: "If two inches of rain per diem brings down one-quarter of a company's parapet, and one company, working



about twenty-six hours per diem, can revet one-eighth of a company's parapet, how long will your trenches last—given the additional premisses that no revetments to speak of are to be had, and that two inches of rain is only a minimum ration ? ”

We have indented for a fleet ; and even a few auxiliary cruisers and some packets of torpedoes would be better than nothing, which is what we have got so far. We are buoyed up—and we need it—by the reflection that the Huns must be even worse off, as they are not in a position to mobilize their canal garrison, or spare any that remain of the U class.

### XIII

THERE'S really nothing I hate talking about more, but, talking about trenches, have you in England heard yet of the awful case of S 245 ?

Well, we took over S 245 with two platoons and instructions to "make it good." Having inspected it we wrote out a curt little chit to the effect that we weren't a reformatory, and then tore it up. By using all the material sent to us, by stealing all the material sent to adjacent companies, battalions and brigades, by devastating farmhouses and stripping bare all the R.E. material dumps within two miles of the line, we made that sodden chaos of shell craters into a recognisable trench.

Finally, when it had stood two nights' rain without disappearing, the O.C. company was just indenting for a D.S.O. with two clasps, when an order arrived saying, with the brief ambiguity natural to all

military orders, that the two platoons holding S 245 would proceed to take over S 246.

Having satisfied himself that this involved the desertion of S 245 he laughed sardonically, ground his teeth, ordered the bearer of the message to be shot at midnight (if the Q.M. could send up enough candles), and went to look at S 246. S 246 was just what S 245 had been, only, of course, one worse.

We got to work on it ; but then a new factor supervened. All available material had already been put into S 245, so we wired for more stuff for revetments. To this we got the answer, " Use material from S 245, which is now to be scrapped." Having used this we wired for material for dug-outs. There was none available through the ordinary channels, but we were referred to S 245. We did what we could.

Then arose the urgent question of heating. This time we did not wait to wire. We dug into the shattered and dishevelled ruins of S 245 and brought up every fragment of woodwork that had been therein sunk since the war began, and used it in the braziers of S 246 to the last fibre.

Having taken this rash step we had no right to be shocked at the order that arrived next morning, "S 245 to be reconstructed and occupied as soon as possible."

You people who compete for having been most directly under the Zeppelins are not the only ones. I was sitting, the other afternoon, in a somnolent condition watching the humid disintegration of the mess dug-out when there was a rushing through the air from above, and a noise like someone lifting the plug of an enormous bath, followed by another like Vesuvius exploding bodily. I went outside when the lava had stopped coming down and found that a trench mortar had dropped a young mine about the size of a hotel three yards off the dug-out. At least I will swear it wasn't as much as thirty. I spent the rest of the afternoon with the signallers, cajoling a battery into some warlike act, while twenty-three further devils descended within a few yards of the first.

After "Stand to," came along the O.C. right company.

"Do you know," he said, "that con-

founded trench mortar was plugging 'em in just behind our mess all the afternoon ? ” I admitted I had heard some explosions. Next I met O.C. left company (mine was centre). “ It’s extraordinary,” he said, “ that our guns can’t get straight on to a thing like that. The beggar was dropping them practically into my dug-out from half-past two to half-past four.” I was duly scandalized and sympathetic. Later on I learned that the mortar had nearly (but not quite) massacred two passing Generals and practically (but not quite) wrecked headquarters ; and eventually mine was the only sector for some miles round which did not report heavy bombardment. I had originally thought out a rather effective little *brochure* about it all, but, with everyone else suffering so, it seemed up to us to keep our own woes dark. But it was a rare lesson in the human instinct of borrowing trouble because mourning suits you.

Atkins is really best when an ordinary mortal might be contemplating suicide or desertion. From a mile behind our line runs a communication trench named Muddy

Lane. In parts it is excellent. In parts you go in, during rainy weather, up to your middle. One night, after it had been pouring for some weeks, a fatigue staggered up this appalling swamp, carrying out-size hurdles weighing about eight hundred-weight apiece, brought from a good two miles back. As they arrived in the fire trench, grunting and sweating and looking—if one could have seen them—like a wet landslide, the last but one turned to the last man and observed reflectively, “I wonder now, Bill, wot made them call this ’ere Muddy Lane.”

## XIV

WE are enjoying a rest.

There can be no doubt about this, because we have been told we are, on very high authority.

When the British soldier has been into trenches and out again, with an occasional battle to break the monotony, for a period of fifteen months, he always gets a rest.

To a rest two items are indispensable :—

1. Mud.

2. A nine-hours' day.

Only a few days ago we did not know this. When they told us we were going to be rested, though we did not believe it for a moment, we imagined that rest consisted in long hours of sleep, warm comfortable billets, perhaps a dinner or a *matinée* now and again, and a few bright, brief and brotherly parades.

Then we were sentenced to rest. We marched deliberately out of a civilized town

to a soggy malodorous marsh, where some war-weary A.S.C. driver had got tired of the tents he was carrying, and dropped them disgustedly into a couple of feet of mud, hoping no one would notice.

But no, the eagle eye of some red-spangled controller of our destinies spotted the jettison and said, "It's a rest camp!"

And that is how we came to be where we are.

There are no temptations. The mud is not deep enough to drown oneself, and no good soldier ever uses his rifle or side-arm to commit suicide with.

For two days we lay in a condition of bleak and comatose resignation, while our complaints passed through the usual official channels to the usual official terminus. (Wicker, 2s. 6½d.)

On the third day we received our programme. It provided for nine hours' military training *per diem*—with intervals for meals; for there was this generosity in their justice—we were not required to do the nine hours straight off. This routine began at daylight and ended at dusk.



In case any slacker should be cast down by this prospect, the very Exalted and Benevolent Person who had planned the Rest visited us and assured us that this was to be a complete vacation ; that the men were to be encouraged to play football and hold sing-songs after afternoon parade. Singing and football, it appeared, would keep the men thoroughly cheerful. The idea was, of course, quite new to us. We asked him how many hours after dusk he would like the men to sing for ; and when he had gone away we indented for luminous footballs. But we regret to report that there have already been several cases of men not singing either on the line of march or during the leisurely evening hours which should be given over to harmless revelry. Footballs of the required type, moreover, have as yet not been forwarded to us.

Fortunately, however, we have numerous other healthy occupations in our copious spare time. We are kept busy by all sorts of red-hatted explorers whose curiosity goads them into visiting the less wet parts of the Rest Camp, and, after complaining

that we have allowed it to get into a disgraceful condition, inquiring—(a) Why we do not build huts. (b) What is the ration of candles and pepper per man. (c) Why we do not take more care of the men's health. (d) Why we mollicoddle the men; and, lastly and most humorously, (e) Whether we have any complaints, and if we have why we have not forwarded them to the Proper Quarter.

It is stated, but unconfirmed, that one of our newest subalterns met some Commander-in-Chief or something the other day and was asked by him in the intervals of saluting what was the extent of the fuel-ration; whereon he replied, "Three ounces." The General clicked his teeth smartly and asked the subaltern whether *that* was all he knew about fuel; and the subaltern said that in the trenches indeed the men got two pounds and a half and in billets four pounds, but in this deleted spot it wouldn't run to more than three ounces, and you had to steal that. As the subaltern is still uncashiered these exchanges may not be as reported.

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The men surveyed their new home on arrival in silent bewilderment. They received the programme without comment. It took two hours' tactical training of five units to extract from Private Thomas, who commonly speaks the public mind, the observation, addressed to the four winds during an "easy": "And to think that there's some as would spoil an 'eavenly 'oliday like this 'ere with *grousin* ! "

## XV

ABOUT 10.30 o'clock on the night of the —th —er, 19—, I was shivering in my tent and trying to extract a pair of frozen feet from a pair of freezing gum-boots with the help of a tent pole when an orderly dashed in with a message marked " Urgent or ordinary " for my immediate use.

It appeared therefrom that no less a person than —— was going to inspect us to-morrow.

I read on with comparative nonchalance (chalance was out of the question at that temperature) until I came to a bit about Company Commanders. (I was, in a manner of speaking, a Company Commander at that date. I believe I got an extra six-pence a day for it, on account of the responsibility, you know—or perhaps it was to keep a horse with ; anyhow, " Company Commanders," read the message, " will be expected to know everything.")

More words may have followed qualifying even this moderate expectation ; but as a matter of fact I suddenly realised just at this point that I was ill—horribly ill ; had been for weeks.

With a feeble gesture and a few curt decisive orders I indicated to the orderly that I wished him to hand the message on to the Sergeant-Major. Then I fell back and would have swooned but for—— I can't really think why I didn't swoon. Perhaps because there was no one looking.

There are various ways of squaring doctors. It happened by chance that I had a great number of socks on hand. The strength of a man is his weakest kink. Our doctor's kink is socks. You can't give him enough. He has an idea, apparently not shared by official sources of issue, that socks save the men from frostbite. Anyhow, next day he provided me with a motor-car and a disease—I learned its name by heart—and left another officer with the company to swank before the inspector. I believe in giving some of the younger men a chance.

They brought me gradually here. We

arrived at dead of night and took the place by complete surprise. Eventually we were lined up and asked to account for ourselves. I assured them that I was seventy-seven years old, had thirty-two years' service, had been in the country nineteen years and was a Bush Baptist.

The R.A.M.C. Corporal seemed dubious, but allowed me into B Ward. There a sister woke up and inquired what was the matter with me.

I told her.

She seemed incredulous and asked me again.

I repeated my lesson twice, and even then I was sure she didn't believe me.

"Where have you got it?" she asked.

"Here," I said. "I didn't like trusting it to my valise."

She made a disappointed noise.

"Haven't you a card?" she began again.

"I'm awfully sorry," I said, "but I've had none printed since war broke out. You see——"

"I mean a card saying what's the

matter with you—from the clearing station ? ”

“ No,” I said ; “ no. You see, they couldn’t have got it all in on a card, and it wasn’t worth writing a letter, as I was coming myself so soon.”

She sent me to bed.

Next day the doctor came round. I told him nearly the whole truth.

“ Fact is,” I said, “ the division’s ‘ resting,’ and I’m most awfully fed up, and our doc. thought——”

“ I see,” he said. “ How long have you been out ? ”

I told him.

He was a very sensible sort of doctor.

## XVI

HERE where the world is quiet except for the noise of the rain trickling into one's valise through the nooks and crannies of one's rustic apartment—here where there is no peril from above and no peril from in front, neither peril of enfilade, here too—it is a Base I am doing this sentence about—we have our problems.

To begin with there is the glorious uncertainty of things. Some men are here to-day and the far side of Wipers to-morrow night. Others arrive from England thirsting for all sorts of things that no sane man ever wants to have anything to do with, and are kept doing a bomb course and a machine-gun course on alternate days for eight months. There is a tale told of one such who, when he was finally sent to the trenches, was returned as hopeless after three days because he would do nothing except sit beside a machine gun trying to fill the belt with



grenades. There is no sadder story in the war.

Now if I knew for certain that I was going to be here eight months I could marry and settle down. Or if I knew for certain I was for Wipers to-morrow night I could make a new will—not that there's anything the matter with the old one, but I met a man on leave who put me up to some good tips in will-making—and settle up. But as it is part of our military system for junior officers not to know anything I dare not even have my letters forwarded.

Anyhow, Bases are not what they were in my young days. Of course there were always parades ; but you obviously couldn't parade while you were busy over some Alternative Necessary Duty. Alternative Necessary Duties were always my strongest suit. On the evening of my arrival in camp I would summon the Band Sergeant and provide him with my programme of work. On Monday he would please arrange for a criminal in my detail. On Tuesday I would use my influence in the matter of obtaining clothing for my detail. This

would be a very laborious task, involving three signatures in ink or indelible pencil ; but no matter, to a good officer the comfort of his men comes before everything. On Wednesday I would pay my men. Rotten job, paying out, but ensures Generous Glow, and no expense unless you lose the Acquittance Roll. On Thursday I would read Standing Orders to the latest arrived draft ; maybe they had had this done to them once already, but one cannot be too particular. A private I know of who had only had Standing Orders read to him once got into awful trouble through carelessly kicking a recalcitrant corporal on the head. That just shows you. On Friday—but I weary you, if that be possible. Suffice it that the Base went very well then.

The trouble began, as usual, high up. The G.O. Commanding something most frightfully important inspected one of our parades one morning and found 7,528 other ranks under one Second-Lieutenant. All might have been well if the Second-Lieutenant had not forgotten to fire the correct salute of fourteen bombs (or whatever was

the correct salute). The G.O.C. investigated. He searched the woods and delved in the instructional trenches, but never another officer came to light. So he went home and, after a bad lunch—we surmise—set himself to abolish Alternative Necessary Duties in a formal edict. No officer is to absent himself from a parade except by the express orders of an O.C. Base Dépôt.

This happened several days ago, and the ruling is probably obsolete by now, but I am wondering how I shall break the news to the G.O.C. if I should happen to meet him on one of my morning walks into town ; and in my heart of heart I know that one fine morning I shall be cowardly, and wake before nine, and attend my first parade at army Base. Some zealous despatch-rider will dash hot-foot to the G.O.C. with the news, and he will come and rub his hands and chuckle and gloat. It will be a Black Day.

Here too there are minor points of etiquette that vex one. Is it correct for me, having bought half a kilo of chocolates while waiting for a train, to kill further

time by eating them out of a paper bag under the surveillance of an A.S.C. sergeant? or ought I to offer a few to the sergeant with some *jeu d'esprit*—never coarse and never cruel—about bully beef? Of such are the complexities with which a Base harasses the soul of an officer nurtured in the genial simplicity of trench life.

## XVII

HOME again ! The Base softened its heart on the very morning on which I had practically decided to attend a parade next day if I were called in time, and released me with an enormous command to conduct to the war. I told the senior N.C.O. at the station of entrainment that I would regard him as personally responsible if he dropped any of the men on the line or under the engine on the way up, and was just off to look for food when the R.T.O. told me the train was due out in two minutes. After making quite sure that he wasn't a Major I reminded him that for that matter the war had been due to be over last September, also that I had used some of his trains before and that he couldn't teach me two-penny-worth about them I hadn't known from childhood. This I said courteously but firmly, and thereafter felt better and bought eight boiled eggs, a ham sandwich made so

hastily that the ham came to be altogether omitted, three oranges and a large mineral-water. The train was in the station for three-quarters-of-an-hour after I returned. I passed the time pleasantly by walking up and down in front of the R.T.O.

And now I am here. Glory apart, I could think for a long time without hitting on anywhere beastlier to be except perhaps just the other side of a breastwork thirty yards off where the Bosch has been dropping heavy crumps in threes with monotonous regularity since an indecent hour this morning. I have been partly asleep, partly waiting for one to drop thirty yards short. There is no one to talk to except a chaffinch who thinks of nothing but his appearance. If I thought of mine I should go mad. I am wet under and through and over everything—wet, not with rain, but with mud. You have heard that there is mud in Flanders ?

But the worst part really is the number of hours in a day ; we have as many as ten nowadays in which movement is simply not done. Where dawn finds you, dusk

releases you. That is here ; I believe we have some real trenches somewhere behind. But we of the ten hours' stretch run out of employment early in the morning and remain there the rest of the day. Of course you can eat—if your rations really came up last night—but not, I think, continuously for ten hours. A very inferior officer—not I—has invented a recipe for the ten-hour day which may appeal to some similarly loose-ended officer. You take an air-pillow and lie with your gum-booted feet on it till the position becomes intolerable ; then you remove the pillow, sit up and pick the mud off it. When it's clean you do the same thing again. One tour of this duty will take an hour if you are conscientious. Its inventor claims that it makes the sun fairly bustle down the sky.

There are advantages in solitary feeding. Haven't you ever wanted, when confronted with a lunch tongue, to hack out all the nice tonguey bits for yourself and leave the bully beef parts to be used for soup or some other domestic economy ? Well, I hack out the tonguey bits every day. True, I usually

have to eat the bully beef parts next meal, but—*à la guerre comme à la guerre*—I always *might* have been casualtied between meals, and then think what a fool I'd feel over my failure to make the most of the first.

I've come to the conclusion that this army isn't really fair. Some battalions I've met always seem to be doing three weeks' rest down at Boulogne or Nice or somewhere like that. Thrice and four times have I come and come back to this battalion, and every blessed time they've been either in trenches when I arrived, or situated directly behind the trenches and going up, it might be, to make some more.

Sometimes we go up to dig, sometimes to carry, sometimes both. On the night of my re-arrival I went up with the digging party, and have the honour to report the following conversation between a certain one of our diggers and a friend who loomed up carrying about four engineer dug-outs, two coils of barbed wire, and a maul. You could just make out the man under it all as he stumbled erratically along a mud-ridden track.



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“ ’Ello, Steve,” says the digger, “ wot’s yer game to-night ? ”

Steve stopped for a second to look at his interrogator and then observed genially as he moved on :—

“ Oh, just killin’ time, you know.”

## XVIII

THERE is one matter I have hitherto not touched on, because it has not hitherto touched on me, and that is Courses.

The ideal course works like this. You are sitting up to the ears in mud under a brisk howitzer, trench mortar and rifle grenade fire, when a respectful signaller crawls round a traverse, remarking, "Message, Sir."

You take the chit from him languidly, wondering whether you have earned a court-martial by omitting to report on the trench sleeping-suits which someone in the Rearward Services has omitted to forward, and you read, still languidly at first; then you get up and whoop, throw your primus stove into the air and proceed to dance on the parapet, if your trench has one. Then you settle down and read your message again to see if it still runs, "You are detailed to attend three months' Staff work

course at Boulogne, commencing to-morrow. A car will be at the dump for you to-night. A month's leave on completion, of course."

But all courses are not like this ; all you can say is that some are less unlike it than others. I was sitting in a warm billet about twelve noon having breakfast on the first day out of trenches when the blow fell on me. I was to report about two days ago at a School of Instruction some two hundred yards away. I gathered that the course had started without me. I set some leisurely inquiries in train, in the hope that it might be over before I joined up. I also asked the Adjutant whether I couldn't have it put off till next time in trenches, or have it debited to me as half a machine-gun course payable on demand, or exchange it for a guinea-pig or a canary, or do anything consistent with the honour of an officer to stave it off. For, to tell the truth, like all people who know nothing and have known it for a long time, I cherish a deeply-rooted objection to being instructed.

Unfortunately the Adjutant is one of those weak fellows who always tell you that

they are mere machines in the grip of the powers that change great nations. So on the third day I bought a nice new slate and satchel and joined up.

Even now, after some days of intense instruction, I find my condition is a little confused and foggy. Of course it covers practically the whole field of military interests, and I ought to be able to win the war in about three-quarters of an hour, given a reasonable modicum of men, guns, indents, physical training and bayonet exercise, knowledge of military law, and acquaintance with the approved methods of conducting a casualty clearing station, a mechanical transport column and a field kitchen. The confusion of mind evident in this last sentence is a high testimonial to the comprehensive nature of our course.

Physical training made the strongest appeal to me. I remember some of the best words, not perhaps as they are, but as I caught them from an almost over-glib expert. Did you know you had a strabismal vertebra? or, given a strabismal vertebra, that it could be developed to

almost any extent by simply 'eaving from the 'ips? Take my tip and try it next time you're under shell-fire.

To-morrow we break up, and I join the army. The army has gone away somewhere while I wasn't looking, and I shall have to make inquiries about it. You never can tell what these things will do when not kept under the strictest observation. My bit *may* have gone to Egypt or Nyassaland or Negri-Sembilan. But I have a depressing feeling that A 27  $\times y z$  iv. 9.8 will be nearer the mark, and that I shall find it meandering nightly to Bk 171 in large droves, there to insert more and more humps of soggy Belgium into more and more sand-bags. I don't want to make myself unpleasant to the War Office, but I really can't see why we haven't once and for all built trenches all done up in 8-inch thick steel plates. They could easily be brought up ready-made, and simply sunk into position.

They would sink all right; you'd just have to put them down anywhere and look the other way for a minute. The difficulty

would be to stop the lift before it got to the basement—if there is a basement in Flanders.

There is a tragedy to report. We were adopted recently by a magpie. He was a gentle creature of impulsive habits and strong woodpecking instincts. Arsène we called him. For some days he gladdened us with his soft bright eye. But when we came to know him well and I relied on him to break the shells of my eggs every morning at breakfast, to steal my pens and spill my ink, to wake me by a gentle nip on the nose from his firm but courteous beak, a rough grenadier came one day to explain a new type of infernal machine, and, when we went out, left a detonator on the table.

I never saw what actually followed, but we buried Arsène with full military honours.

## XIX

OF recent days we have almost stopped pretending to be soldiers and owned up to being civilian labourers lodged in the war zone. This is felt so acutely that several leading privates have quite discarded that absolute attribute of the infantryman, the rifle. They return from working parties completely unarmed, discover the fact with a mild and but half-regretful astonishment and report the circumstance to section-commanders as if they had lost one round of small arms ammunition or the last cube from an iron ration.

The hobby of the civilian labourer is obstacle-racing. To do this you require a dark night, the assistance of some Royal Engineers, an appointment just behind the front line with some supervisor of labour whom you don't know and don't specially want to, and a four-mile stretch across country to the rendezvous.

You start out at nightfall and do good time over the first hundred yards. The field consists of forty to eighty labourers and one of the idle rich (formerly styled officers). At the hundred yards' mark the Royal Engineers begin to come in. Obstacle 1 is a model trench, built for instructional purposes and now being turned to obstruational account. There's one place where you can get on to the parados without swimming, and if we started by daylight we might strike it. We do not start by daylight.

Beyond the trench is a wire entanglement, also a fine specimen of early 1915 R.E. work. We may note in passing the trip wire eight yards beyond. We're getting pretty good with it now, but in our early days the R.E. used to get a lot of marks for it.

You go on towards a couple of moated hedges, whimsically barbed in odd spots, and emerge into a park or open space leading into an unhealthy-looking road. It seems all plain sailing to the road—unless you know the R.E., in which case you will



not be surprised to find your neck nearly bisected by a horizontal wire designed to encourage telephonic communication.

Eventually you all reach an area known for some obscure reason—if for any at all—as “The Brigade.” Here the R.E. have a new game waiting for you. We call it “Hunt the Shovels.” You have been instructed to draw shovels from The Brigade. The term covers a space of some thousand square metres intersected with hedges, bridges, rivers, dug-outs, horse-ponds (natural and adventitious), any square metre of which may contain your shovels.

If you are not behind time so far this is where you drop a quarter of an hour. Of course you may just get fed up and go home. But in that case you aren’t allowed to play again, and as a matter of fact the game is rather *de rigueur* out here. So you hide your party behind a sign-post, which tells you—if it were not too dark to read—INFANTRY MUST NOT HALT HERE, and then a lance-corporal with a good nose for shovels looks through the more likely hiding-

places. The search is rendered pleasant as well as interesting by the fact that all The Brigade has been trodden into a morass by months of shovel-hunting.

Beyond The Brigade the obstacles really begin. But if you use a revolver freely for wire-cutting and rope your party together—this prevents any one sitting down by the wayside to take his boots off “because they draws that bad”—you will reach the rendezvous assigned to you within an hour of the time assigned to you. At this point you will learn that no guide has been seen or heard of there, and, subsequently, that the guide was warned for another square that certainly looks very similar on the map. But again, if you know guides, you will guess that he went straight to the spot where the job was to be done without bothering about anything so intricate or superfluous as a rendezvous. Anyhow you will probably end by getting some sort of casual labour somewhere, some time or other, and no questions asked so long as you don't inadvertently dig through from a main drain into a C.O.'s dugout.

There is a new joke too, a Red Book, out of which we are gradually becoming millionaires. It is full of comfortable claims and allowances for gentlemen serving the King overseas. The only thing is it takes a bit of working out. There are so many channels of enrichment. Thus in June—I forget the exact date—I spent a night in the train. Although I had a bed and beer in bottles all the way from England, not to mention usual meals and part use of doctor, I became entitled to one franc ten centimes in lieu of something which I have now forgotten. (Authority, W. O. Letter 2719 / x p  $\frac{4.5}{2}$  19 ✓ 2.15.) Then a broken revolver is worth no less than seventy-two shillings, but I have to collect autographs to get that. Unclaimed groom's allowance—I don't think my groom has claimed it—comes to nearly four-and-sixpence ; and I find I have been quite needlessly getting my hair cut at my own expense these many months.

And yet I am afraid that when I have made it all out and got a chartered accountant to account for it—that ought to

mean a few pounds Chartered Accountant allowance — my application will be returned to me because the envelope is not that shade of mauve officially ordained for the enclosure of Overseas Officers' Claims.

## XX

SOME officers like putting up barbed wire, not so much, I think, from any real deep-seated affection for the stuff itself, or from any confidence in the protection it affords—its disintegration being one of the assumed preliminaries of an attack—as for the satisfaction of writing in the Weekly Work Report, “ In front of X276 we put up 97 rolls of barbed wire ; in front of S279, 342 rolls ; in front of X276a, 3,692 rolls . . . ” and so on.

An officer who overdoes this sport of kings gets a trench a bad name ; it becomes a trench with a great wiring tradition to be maintained. One of us took over a legacy from one of these barbarians last trip. H.Q. had got wind of his zeal and was determined that we for our part should not be idle. It was murmured in billets, it was whispered upon the *pavé*, that for the officer taking over B116 there was a great wiring

toward. The officer taking over B116 hated wiring worse than bully beef. He said you either die of pneumonia through standing still pretending to supervise, or tire yourself to bits and earn the undying contempt of your party by pretending to take an active share in the game.

Howbeit he took over B116 and was told by the Next Man Up to wire to his heart's content. He asked the Next Man Up just where he wanted the wiring to be performed. The Next Man Up waved an airy arm in the direction of the Hun, and observed, " Out there, of course. Think we wanted you to wire Hampstead Heath ? " Then the B116 officer took the N.M.U. to the parapet and showed him waving acres of high wire, low wire, loose wire, tight wire, thick wire, thin wire, two ply, three ply and four ply, plain and barbed, running out and out into the dusk.

The N.M.U. gave it all a dispassionate sort of look, and merely said, " Oh, go out in front of all that. The Bosch is miles off just here."

Now B116 is a front line trench in a re-

entrant. The Hun trench facing it is also in a re-entrant, the original front lines on both sides having been crumpled and flooded out of existence. So when night fell the officer of B116 took his party and set out, and he went on and on, and then on, and there was still wire. And he went on and on and on. And there were bits of old trenches and saps and listening posts, but still wire. And he went on and on and there were more bits of trench and more wire. And he went on and on—and I know this is true because he told me—and on and on until (no, he did not come back to our own trench, he had a compass) an exceptionally good lot of fireworks went up, and he was fired at and bombed by Germans behind and Germans in front and Germans on either side, and, mind you, he was still in the wire. So he waited until all the Germans appeared to have killed each other or gone to sleep, and brought his party laboriously back to B116, from which he sent to the Next Man Up a message which ran: "If you want me to wire Bosch third line, kindly arrange for artillery preparation."

It is some days now since they put up any wire in front of B116.

It is a fact well known to all our most widely-circulated photographic dailies that these German gunners waste a power of ammunition. The only criticism I have to make is that I wish they would waste it more carefully. The way they go strewing the stuff about round us is such that they're bound to hit someone or something before long. Still we have only two more days in, and they seldom give us more than ten thousand shells a day.

\* \* \* \* \*

We are in billets now, and frankly, I am beginning to be very exercised about my boots. When I say "my boots" I mean rather the boots concerning me than "the boots that are mine." I wanted, some couple of months ago, a new pair of boots. I told the Quartermaster, and he looked at my then boots superciliously and said he could quite believe it.

I rashly left it at that, imagining something would happen. A man like a Quartermaster, who rolls in boots, would, I felt,



think nothing of sending along a dozen pairs before breakfast, with a chit telling me to give away what I couldn't use. But no. It seems every boot in his store was numbered. I approached him again, and demanded boots, soberly, seriously and strenuously. I even offered to pay for them. This appeared to cheer him a little, and he murmured something about Army Form 247 x<sup>2</sup>b, not at present in stock, but indispensable to the issue of the most negligible boot on payment. My further efforts were, owing to exigencies of my military situation, conducted through emissaries. My servant would demand of his company agent nightly, what about them boots? And the company agent would reply—also nightly—that, if the officer would send his size down, the matter would be put through at once. For five nights running my size in boots went down with the empty water tins. On the last night I added a sketch of my feet and of my present boots, with scale of kilometres subjoined, a brief history of footgear in Flanders from pre-Cæsarian times to the present day, one piece of

broken lace from the old boots, and anything else that struck me as likely to put the matter a little further through.

The lace appeared to put quite a new idea into their heads. The advance booting agent now seemed to think that if I had some boots already I might get the new pair by a process known as exchange, which takes less time and has the additional advantage of not costing anything. This struck them as an excellent new game for several days while they were deciding which was the right army form for an officer desirous of exchanging boots. At last all appeared fixed up. I came back into billets with every confidence of finding a couple of boots waiting for me on the mat. Of course I didn't really *believe* they would be there ; I only had every confidence. Anyhow they were not.

This morning the Quartermaster called in person. He wanted to know what size I took in boots.

I expect now that the matter will be put through almost at once.

## XXI

I WONDER if the chap who first thought out this shell business realised the extraordinary inconvenience it would cause to gentlemen at rest during what the Photographic Press alludes to as "a lull in the fighting."

Once upon a time billets were billets. You came into such, and thereafter for a spell of days forgot about the war unless you got an odd shell into the kitchen. But now—well, about noon on the first day's rest, seventy-odd batteries of our 12, 16, and 24-inch guns set about their daily task of touching up a selected target, say a sap-head or something new from Unter den Linden in spring barbed-wirings which has been puzzling a patrol. This is all right in its way ; but the Hun still owns one or two guns opposite us. And by 12.5 all is unquiet on the Western Front. This is all right in its way ; but about 3 P.M. the Hun

is roused to the depths of his savage nature, and one wakes up to find Hildebrand and Hoffelbuster, the two guns told off to attend to our liberty area, scattering missiles far and wide, but mostly wide, and a covey of aeroplanes bombing the local cabbageries. This again is all right in its way, but in the meantime the mutual noise further up the line has become so loud that Someone very far back and high up catches the echo of it, and a bare hour later we receive the order to stand-to at once, ready to move off twenty minutes ago.

Within three minutes of our first stand-to I was up with the company, hastily but adequately mobilised with my servant's rifle, five smoke helmets (I took all I could see; this is *camaraderie*), a biscuit, the Indispensable Military Pocket Book (8-in. by 10-in.), a revolver (disqualified for military uses owing to absence of ammunition), Russian Picture Tales, and a tooth-brush. I find a general opinion prevalent in the company that "if Fritz knew *we* was standing-to 'e'd pack in." Word must have come through to Fritz somehow, for he

shortly packs in—say about 1 A.M.—and we follow suit after the news has spent a couple of hours or so flashing round the wires in search of us. And we go to sleep until to-morrow mid-day, when the day's play begins again.

When we had been thus “rested” for some days we went and took over a nice new line, with lots of funny bits in it. The front line had three bits.

*Left sector*—Mine (exploded ; possibly held by Bosch on far side).

*Central sector*—Mine ? (unexploded ; not held by Bosch anywhere).

*Right sector*—Mine (exploded ; possibly held by Bosch on far side).

Our position seemed a little problematical. The left and right we satisfied ourselves about at once, but the centre was in a class by itself. We demanded an investigator, somebody with wide mine-sweeping experience preferred.

About 2 A.M. on our first day in, a figure loomed up through a snowstorm from the back of the central trench and asked forlornly if there might be any mines here—

abouts. We admitted there might be, or again there might not. He questioned us precisely where they were suspected, and we told him "underneath." He scratched his head and announced that he was sent to look for them. His qualifications consisted apparently in his having coal-mined. But he seemed confident of detecting the quicker combustion sort, until he asked for necessary impedimenta. It seems that no good collier can detect an H.E. or any sort of mine without a pail of water, and a hole about 2,000 feet deep, and a pulley, and a rope ladder and a bratting-slat.

It's true we had some good holes in parts of the trench, where you probably go down 2,000 feet if you step off the footboards, and the rest of the staff we might have contrived to improvise. But for the moment we had somehow run clean out of bratting-slats.

So we had to return the poor fellow with a request that all experts should be completed with bratting-slats before being sent to the front line. This request only produced the senseless interrogation, "What

is a bratting-slat ? ” to which we have not yet bothered to reply. In the meantime if we are really sitting on a mine it seems quite a tame one. It hasn't as much as barked yet.

Just in our bit we aren't very well off for dug-outs ; it isn't really what you'd call a representative sector from any point of view. But during a blizzard the other night a messenger who had mislaid himself took us for a serious trench. He made his way along, looking to right and left for some seat of authority until he came to a hole in the parados, two feet by one, where some fortunate fellow had ejected an ammunition box and was attempting to boil water on a night-light. The messenger bent low and asked huskily—

“ Is this 'ere comp'ny 'ed-quarters ? ”

The water-boiler looked up.

“ No,” he replied, “ it ain't. It's G.H.Q., but Duggie 'Aig ain't at 'ome to no one this evenin'.”

## XXII

THE subtlety of the Military mind beats and will beat me to the end. Yesterday we lived in a row of earthen dwellings in a depression in the ground, which anyone might be excused for referring to, if not as trenches, at least as dug-outs. These alone of all the marvels of military engineering I have observed during the war admitted of being shelled with equal exactitude from due in front and due in rear ; and water seemed to have been laid on throughout. Taking all these things into consideration some Authority labelled them, once for all, " Billets."

Last night we moved into a commodious cellar of a house which still leans against the next. It is only five minutes from town, and tram-lines pass the door. Nay more, they stop abruptly at the door—such are the improvements effected by H.E. Inside the cellar are three bits of chairs, a



table-top on boxes, and an inimitable ancestral smell that no deodoriser known to modern warfare can cope with. And all this is called "Trenches!" Our servants do their best to support the official illusion by neglecting to clean our boots and regarding with surprise and some little sadness any tendency on our part to wash.

But you must not imagine that life here is all honey. Even here we do a bit for our eight-and-sixpence. Every evening there comes down from the front line a report that our men there want more food. A stricter or less beneficent C.O. than ours might at once institute a court of inquiry into what has happened to all the food we gave them last night. But not so with us. "The boys want food," he says to the Adjutant, "and, by Heaven, the boys shall have it."

No sooner said than handed on to someone else to do. The Adjutant works off a little bit of his strong personal dislike for me in a note, couched, if you please, in the most friendly terms, intimating that he has raised heaven and earth to get me off, but the C.O. insists that I (as the only competent officer

for the task) shall supervise the conduct of our rations to the front, middle and back lines to-night. He adds that the Intelligence Corps report that information received from deserters leads us to suppose that Fritz intends to strafe all roads and communication trenches in our sector to-night.

The carrying party is supplied by a sister battalion, and makes the night thoroughly well acquainted with its views about a unit that can't supply blanks to carry their blanked rations for their blanked selves. Sometimes a second or a third trip may be necessary, and then the carriers' patriotic fervour expresses itself in terms almost potent enough to do the carrying for them. For some reason or other the R.E., who design material for our portage, consider its end and not its portability. Their special line of ready-made wire entanglements would entangle a hippopotamus; and when it comes to carrying one a mile-and-a-half you find it has no wheels, no handles, and simply won't fold up into the pocket. The usual procedure is for a man or two to roll on one of these barbed-wire

death-traps until they are well stuck on them and then crawl to the point of delivery.

Sometimes, of course, we have accidents. Last night, for instance, two men were proceeding (by the way the great point about being a soldier is that you never walk, run or otherwise ambulate—you proceed, or proceed at the double, which of course is much nicer for you)—yes, were proceeding one at each end of an entanglement, along the top of a slope, when the leader missed his footing altogether and rolled down to the morass below. The second, after a brief struggle, followed with the entanglement. This movement involved not only the man behind, who was bearing a foot-board, but also the remainder of the section. The entire avalanche was precipitated on to the leaders, and remained there struggling like the population of a fly-paper until a squad arrived with wire cutters. When the R.E. heard of it they wanted the episode published in Corps Orders as a testimonial. But what the men wanted done about the R.E. I dare not tell you.

## XXIII

THE following fragment, intended, no doubt, for *Punch*, was found after his death among Alec Johnston's effects :—

What do you think we've been doing now? Try three guesses. No, and No, and—fighting? *Certainly* not. You've given it up? Well, digging. There!

That's how we know we've got back to the war. Night by night parties 1 to 12 parade shufflingly in mud and rain and wind and darkness, draw an unceasing flow of shovels from The Brigade or other preconcerted plague spot, and shuffle up to what winter and the Bosch and the untiring energies of the division we took over from have left of some once glorious trench.

Shortly before dawn we shuffle home, and next day a Brigadier comes up to the line, and staggers back overwhelmed at the sight of this same trench that he almost

gave up as hopeless the day before. Smiling in the morning sun, completely re-decorated and reupholstered in this season's most fetching sand-bagging, and designed so comprehensively that you can feel and almost see the footboards under your gumboots as you proceed along it.

"Ah!" says the Brigadier, delightedly, "I see that the Greenshires (us) are on the job again. The war is already as good as—er—where it was when we were here last time."

The praise is reported to us and we flush beneath the tan ; and next night we parade again in mud and rain and wind and darkness, and—so it goes, one continuous round of glory and excitement.

\* \* \* \* \*

After all, we *do* live in stirring times. Just as we had settled down to the idea of business as usual, at the very moment when the mud and the rain and the wind and the darkness were all present and correct, and the shovels due in about ten minutes, we received a sudden message from some one in a high place: "Have just remembered you are called Infantry. Would you mind

hunting up some equipment, and seeing if you have any rifles? Report results to this office in quick time, and make all the usual preparations for standing down about 6 A.M."



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